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AUTHOR Funk, Carole
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ABSTRACT

In a field dominated almost exclusively by men, successful women administrators in public schools can provide a rich source of information concerning the advantages and disadvantages of being a "female executive." After briefly discussing well-documented internal and external barriers to women's administrative career aspirations, this paper describes a study of 66 female public school executives in the Texas Metroplex area. Age range was 33 to 63 years, with the largest percentage (57 percent) between 40 and 49. Nearly half were school principals. A semi-structural interview was designed to include 12 questions concerning respondents' skills and characteristics, leadership styles, career aspirations, mentoring opportunities, job satisfaction, problems and pluses attributable to gender, training programs, and advice to aspiring administrators. From the results, a number of generalizations can be made. The typical female administrator taught for 8-10 years, has held an administrative position for less than 10 years, works between 50 and 60 hours weekly, does not aspire to be a superintendent, had a mentor at some time, did not plan an administrative or any other long-term career, and prefers a situational leadership style. Pluses included sensitivity to others' needs, serving as role models for other women, and being well-organized and intuitive on the job. Common problems included difficulty in gaining male respect and acceptance, no entry to the male network, lack of "authority" and trust (from female employees), and employment discrimination. (MLH)

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THE FEMALE EXECUTIVE IN SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION: PROFILES, PLUSES, AND PROBLEMS

Carole Funk
Department of Counselor Education
and Personnel Services
Texas Woman's University
Denton, Texas

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In a field dominated almost exclusively by men, women who successfully occupy leadership positions as public school administrators can provide a rich source of information concerning the advantages and disadvantages of being a "female executive" in a male-dominated world. Although many fields are showing increasing numbers of women in managerial and executive positions, women are not moving up the career ladder into the administration of the public schools. (Adkison, 1981).

It appears that both internal and external barriers combine to prevent women from seeking and obtaining administrative positions. In a report by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA, 1982), the internal barriers were described as conflicts and confusion about life goals, while external barriers were described as employers' negative attitudes, the lack of an influential sponsor, and the lack of a professional network. Bowling (1981) stated that women in school principalships believe they have to work harder than men in these positions, are discouraged from advancement, and are not accepted by their male colleagues and supervisors; men, however, do not view these variables as a reality. Women are usually older than their male counterparts when deciding to enter administrative positions and when seeking certification for the superintendency, the highest position in local public education. McShea (1979) found the factors most inhibiting to the careers

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of women superintendents to be the attitudes of men and women in education toward woman administrators, career and home responsibilities of women, mobility or flexibility to move to new locations, and little background in school finance and contract negotiations.

In light of the problems inherent for women in the field of educational administration in the public school sector, it is important that those women who currently occupy positions in public schools traditionally occupied by men provide data that can be used in a research study designed to determine critical characteristics of these women, the unique problems they face, and the advantages, if any, of being a woman in these positions. In order to determine the profiles, pluses, and problems of these female school executives, a semi-structured interview was designed to include the following questions:

1. What characteristics and skills do you think are most important to a female administrator?
2. How would you describe your current leadership style?
3. When you first became a teacher, was it your goal to become a school administrator?
4. Did you do any systematic, long-range career planning after you began teaching?
5. Did you have a mentor who helped you in your career? Was your mentor male or female?
6. What gives you your greatest satisfactions in your work as an administrator?
7. What are the problems, if any, that you have encountered in your position that you think might be specific to female administrators?
8. What are the "pluses"--if any--of being female in your present position?
9. How have you changed as a person since becoming an administrator?
10. Do you plan to apply for a superintendency in the future? If not, to what position do you aspire?

11. In what ways could your administrative training program have better prepared you for administration?

12. What advice would you give a prospective female school administrator about being successful in this field?

In addition to the questions listed above, the interviews were designed to obtain the following demographic data from the respondents: age, name and types of university degrees and certificates, number of years spent as a teacher, level(s) at which they taught, marital status, number of years they have served in administrative positions, present job title and length of time in that position, and average number of hours in their work week. The semi-structured interviews that formed the basis for this study were conducted by the members of the Summer I (1985) class entitled "Women and Careers in Education." Each member of the class was assigned the task of interviewing two female public school administrators in the Metroplex area. The researcher compiled the results of this study from the verbatim transcripts turned in by the students after they had completed their interviews. Almost all the responses provided usable data.

The sample in this study was composed of 66 female school executives from public school districts in the Metroplex area of Texas. The age range of the subjects was from 33 years to 63 years of age. The largest percentage of women in the sample (57%) fell between the ages of 40 and 49 years. Most of the members of the sample were married (64%); 24% were divorced and 7.5% were single. Three were widows.

Of the 66 members of the group, 44% were school principals; 29% were directors at the central office level, while 11% were assistant principals. Assistant superintendents accounted for 7.5% of the sample, while two groups, assistants to superintendents and central office supervisors, accounted for

for 3% (each) of the sample group. Only one deputy superintendent and one superintendent were interviewed.

Since women traditionally enter the field of administration much later than do males, the number of years that these administrators taught in the classroom before entering administration was of interest to the researcher. Of the 66 members of the sample, 72% taught for 5 to 14 years before going into administrative positions. Fourteen percent taught for 15 to 19 years, while only 7.5% taught for 20 to 24 years before entering a management position. Only 4 members of the sample (6%) taught for a period of 1 to 4 years before leaving the teaching ranks.

The number of years that each female executive had been in administrative positions was also of interest to the researcher. Since women have not been encouraged to enter administrative positions until recent years, their tenure as administrators might indicate a time period when more women began to enter the ranks of administrators in the Metroplex. Figures indicated that 63% of the members of the sample had been in their positions less than 10 years; 36% had been administrators for 5 to 9 years, while 27% had been in these positions for 1 to 4 years. A smaller percentage, 24%, had served for 10 to 14 years; 10.5% served between 15 and 19 years. Only 1 member of the sample had served for over twenty years as an administrator.

Since a Master's Degree is required for an administrative certificate in Texas, all members of the sample had earned master's degrees in addition to their bachelor's degrees. All held the mid-management certificate (a 45 hour program above the master's), while many held supervisor's certificates as well as superintendent's certificates (a 15 semester hour program above the mid-management certificate). Doctoral degrees had been earned by 23% of the sample.

Since women often perceive administrative positions to take "too much of my time away from family and personal life", the number of hours these women worked each week was a component of this study. The data indicate that the majority of women, 75%, worked between 50 and 60 hours a week. Only 11% reported working 45 hours, while 7.5% indicated a 65 hour week. Two members of the sample indicated they worked 70 hours a week; one member indicated that she worked 75 hours, while one at the other end of the scale reported working only a 40 hour week. Comments made by these women indicated that these were minimum times; one stated that she worked "50 hours a week at the school board office, 2 hours a day at home, and 3 Saturdays per month." Another reported working "15 hours a day--12 at school and 3 at home, and in addition, 5-7 hours on the weekend."

One of the primary purposes of this study was to determine those problems encountered by female school administrators that they perceive to be specific to women in administration. Responses included the following problem areas:

1. Difficulty in gaining male respect. This problem was mentioned most frequently by the members of the sample. Women felt that they had to work harder and longer to prove to men that they could do the job and had to be patient while they were proving themselves. Their insights and action plans were often ignored, and those who ignored them were guilty of male chauvinistic attitudes but they tried to hide them.

2. No entry to the "good ol' boy system"--the male network. Many women in the sample (21%) felt left out when the good ol' boys went fishin', felt left out of the decision-making process, found it difficult to speak out at meetings, felt "low on the pecking order", found that men turn to other men for support, and experienced loneliness and isolation in their administrative positions.

3. Not seen as an authority figure/not taken seriously. These women stated that they were not viewed as authority figures by men or women, were seen as "pushovers", and were often taken for granted.

4. Must be better than male competition. Many of the female administrators felt that they had to prove themselves by being smarter, working harder, and being more diligent, with more expertise than their male counterparts. One indicated that "this was not difficult."

5. Not being trusted by other women. Responses indicated that other women in some instances did not wish to work for female administrators, were less accepting than some males, and sometimes tried to take advantage of the "sister female" boss.

6. Difficulty with male parents, maintenance men, and male school board members. Some women reported incidents in which male parents "threw their weight around until they found out that I was the boss." Other comments indicated that maintenance men were unsure that females could handle the principal's role and that males tended to stereotype women and were apprehensive in their dealings with them.

7. Unequal opportunity/discrimination. Several members of the sample mentioned that they had not received equal opportunities for employment or had been discriminated against during their employment history; one indicated that during her principalship "unwritten personnel policies" dictated that female principals must have male assistants because they couldn't have "two women running a school."

8. Seen as a threat to men. Three members of the sample stated that they were perceived as a threat to men and were careful not to "upstage" or "pre-empt" males in higher positions within their districts. One respondent stated that "male supervisors have trouble dealing with assertive, competent females." (Related comments also indicated that in some instances female executives were perceived to be a threat to women as well.)

Other comments given during the interviews in relation to problems that female administrators face included: women friends who don't accept their administrative role, women administrators who react from an emotional point of view, demotions that occured because of husband's moves, being given more difficult tasks to perform than male peers, the inability of some women to take criticism objectively, professional jealousies, more home responsibilities (mentioned only once), women who use feminine wiles to get ahead, and being the victim of "visual stereotyping"--not being perceived as the boss when someone walks into the office.

Another area of interest to this researcher concerned the characteristics and skills that female executives deemed essential to the successful female school administrator. In rank order, the most frequently mentioned skill

areas and characteristics were: (a) people-oriented or interpersonal skills, (b) organizational skills, (c) communication skills (listening was often stressed), (d) knowledgeable (particularly in instruction) and well-grounded and well-read in one's area of expertise, (e) self-confidence and self-esteem, (f) decision-making skills, (g) sense of humor, (h) fair, (i) assertive, (j) understanding and sensitive to the needs of others, (k) public relations skills, (l) strong leadership style, and (m) flexible. Other characteristics and skills mentioned less frequently included: tenatious, patient, objective, intelligent, ability to work harder than others, professional, competent/capable, keeping a "lid on emotions", and having the ability to "switch gears" frequently. Comments that members of the sample gave in relation to necessary characteristics and skills included: "The best attribute is a belief in yourself." "Self-esteem is an absolute must." "You must be sure of yourself." "Make judgments using your head, not your heart." "You must know and like yourself." "You must appear cool, calm, and collected at all times." "Respond to situations, don't react." "You must know how to work with and relate to all kinds of people." "Don't approach administration as a female--your co-workers will treat you differently if you do." Nine respondents indicated that they felt that the characteristics and skills were the same as those needed by successful males in the same positions; this group represented 14% of the entire sample.

When asked about "pluses" that existed for female executives in school administration, 76% indicated that "pluses" did exist for females in their perceptions. The pluses that were described by the majority of female administrators are listed below.

1. Relates well to the needs of others and is sensitive to problems and concerns of others.
2. Serving as a role model/mentor/trail-blazer for other women in school administration.

3. Has a better understanding of female employees, motherhood, children, and family problems of all personnel.

4. Are better organized and pay more attention to details than male counterparts.

5. Can work the system easier.

6. Has sixth sense, intuition, insight and uses it on the job.

Related comments to the "pluses" for female administrators mentioned less frequently included: not perceived as a threat, no need to appear "macho", "mother figure" gets respect from students, seen more as "teacher-principal"--not as a coach, more experienced in instruction, can deal with "grey areas" better than men, is able to evaluate people more quickly than males, and is more analytical. Responses of several women describe the pluses: "Many things are easier because I am a woman." "Kids respect me and don't want to disappoint me." "You don't get categorized as part of the "good ol' boys syndrome." "I don't think parents feel as intimidated by a female authority figure." "I am the only female to be able to go into the boys' lockerroom at the field house" (a female superintendent.) "The restroom line at conventions is very short for women." "Females have never been able to use intimidation; they are more practiced at 'manipulating' people, reading their motives, and using their intuitive abilities to further goals. This makes us better in many ways."

In response to the question concerning whether or not members of the sample planned to become an administrator when they first went into teaching, 90% (59 members of the sample) indicated that they did <u>not</u> aspire to an administrative position when they entered the field of education as a teacher. Only 7 members of the sample expressed the desire to become an administrator when they first became teachers. Comments related to this question included: "It never was a goal--it just happened." "I fought the idea for two years because I really didn't want to be a pioneer."

"I didn't set my goals--it (access to an administrative position) came tc me through feedback from other people." "I was recruited for all my positions." "Administration was the farthest thought from my mind. I just planned to be a teacher."

A related question concerned whether or not these administrators had done any systematic, long-range career planning after they began teaching. Only 18% of the sample indicated that they had done "some" long-term career planning at some point in their teaching careers. The large majority of the sample, 82%, stated that they had done no career planning at this time. Comments included: "No, my career just happened." "No, just rolled with the flow." "No, it was quite coincidental." "I didn't set my goals." "No, because I had always viewed teaching as a short-term career."

When responding to their plans for the future, members of the sample were asked whether or not they now aspired to the superintendency, the top position in local public school education. Since only 24 women are currently superintendents out of 1100 superintendencies in Texas, this question was of interest to the researcher, particularly in light of ideas often expressed in the literature concerning women relating to "fear of success", "fear of taking risks", and "reactive career planning". The answers to this question indicated that only 15 members of the sample (23%) had aspirations for a superintendency at this point in their careers; the large majority of these women indicated that they did not plan to seek the highest position in local education. Their comments included: "I'm not certain I'm qualified." "I am ready--the school board is not ready, so I do not plan to apply." "No, if I were younger I would go into the business world." "No, but I want to go as high as I can." "Never--back to the University in the future." "I have no desire to deal with the financial aspects of the superintendent's job." "I do not want to

give up my association with the children." "Not in the near future. I can't keep up the pace." "Probably not--I've been asked to apply. It's not my interest; I like what I'm doing." "I'm happy being an elementary principal. I'm not hungry to get anywhere."

Since mentors appear to be very important figures in the career growth of both women and men, it appeared to be important to determine whether or not women had mentors during their careers, persons who helped them enter the field of administration or helped them to advance within the administrative ranks. Fifty-five members of the sample (83%) indicated that they did have mentors at some point in their careers; eighteen percent indicated that they never were helped by a mentor. Of the members of the sample who were helped by mentors, 47% stated that their mentors were males; 20% reported that their mentors had been females, while 27% reported having both male and female mentors during their careers.

When asked about their typical leadership style, the female school executives indicated that their leadership styles were primarily situational (variable in response to the situation and the task maturity of the group/individual). This style of leadership was reported by 61% of the sample; 30% responded that they considered their primary style to be democratic. A leadership style that was described as a "mix between Theory Y and Theory Z" was reported by 9% of the group. Responses concerning their leadership styles included the following comments. "I am democratic when dealing with students--I treat all equally. I use situational leadership when dealing with faculty." "I try to be as democratic as possible, but there are some situations that require autocratic decisions." "The situation dictates the approach." "You must use situational leadership--you are leading people of varying ages, levels of education, etc.--teachers, students, parents, custodians."

When asked about how they perceived their leadership styles to be different from men in similar positions, the most frequent responses were that men were more autocratic, perceived themselves as "macho leaders", and were inflexible and less available than women in administrative positions. Women saw themselves as more sensitive, caring, and sympathetic--giving leadership that "personal touch." They also saw themselves as more organized and more attentive to detail. They perceived themselves to be instructional leaders more than men in their peer groups and felt that they listened more, talked less, were more people-oriented, were more assertive than men in their positions, and were calmer and more poised than male administrators. Men were perceived by some members of the sample to be less committed to education and were not motivated to do their best.

Comments related to the question concerning differences in male and female leadership styles in educational administration included the following. "Men tend to stand back, give others jobs, and back off." "I prefer to work a problem out or problem-solve rather than tell the teachers what to do." "A women has to be superb; a man can do a halfway job and succeed." "I seek input more and use it." "My style is to be more facilitative. This does not mean I can't be tough enough to get the job done--I praise more, build up confidence, then watch teachers work for me." "I always consider the view of teachers in my decisions. I've seen a lot of male administrators indicate that they're boss and that's that!" "Males tend to come up through the athletic ranks and usually do not have a strong instructional background." "I would like to say that more women are democratic in their leadership style, but I'm not sure that's true. I think men can be autocratic and get by with it a little bit easier than women can." "I suppose that men tend to operate much like leaders in big business--not caring for the individual. I seem to always be trying

to look out for everyone and trying to please them." "Men tend to want to push people than to lead them." "Most men have the 'three-piece suit complex'; they think just looking the part of the executive will get the job done. I, on the other hand, don't really see anything 'executive' about administrative work--being an administrator, a really good one, takes a lot of sweat, toil, and hours upon hours."

A majority of women reported, in response to a question concerning how they had changed since becoming administrators, that they were more confident and assertive, that they now had the "big picture" of education--the conceptual view, that they had become "tougher" and didn't worry anymore about people liking them, that they were less social and had fewer personal goals, were more dedicated, were better problem-solvers and decision-makers, and were better time managers. Although some members of the sample revealed that they had not changed at all, others reported that they were more observant of people and their needs, were generally more aware, and were more motivated. Comments included: "I'm tired more." "I have learned not to complete a task." "I had to learn to play politics like everyone else." "I feel more alive and I truly know that there is no job too challenging for me to handle." "I use small amounts of time now to the maximum." "I need a wife!" "This job drains all energies; there isn't enough 'me' time." "The budgeting of my time has helped to eliminate the stress factor." "I get a lot less sleep." "I've always been a perfectionist and it will kill you if you don't know how to handle it." "I am more my own person than ever before." "My idealism has been tempered into accepting a small degree of mediocrity."

The respondents' responses to the question concerning the factors that provided them with the greatest satisfaction in their jobs indicated that the greatest satisfiers in terms of frequency of responses were: (a) their ability

to make a difference in student achievement and student self-concepts and (b) developing new programs, making changes for the better, organizing a task and seeing it successfully completed, and making professional decisions that made a difference in the school. Other frequently mentioned responses were: the self-satisfaction obtained from knowing that they had done a good job--that they had really made a difference, working with and helping other people, watching staff members grow, recognition from others, creating a good learning environment and running the school efficiently, watching others succeed, problem-solving, making an impact in the district in terms of having the best school/program, and providing job training and staff development. Comments included: "The greatest satisfaction is seeing teachers light up, get excited about what they're doing and are going to to." "When kiddos change, when a student has a real turnaround because of me or my school, it gives me chill bumps." "I get satisfaction from knowing that everybody (from custodian to superintendent) thinks I am capable as a principal and that I am doing a good job and am fair." "Satisfaction to me is making a difference in a child's life." "Seeing everything 'clicking' in relationship to decisions I have made gives me satisfaction."

Suggestions for better preparation programs at colleges and universities that are preparing women for careers in school administration were given by members of the sample group. The suggestions most frequently mentioned were: more emphasis on fiscal management/budget planning, less theory and more practical aspects, more on-the-job training, more emphasis on teacher evaluation and supervision, more emphasis on strategic problem solving, on maintenance concerns (personnel and equipment), counseling with parents and children, and a greater diversity of experiences in their programs. Other areas mentioned included discipline management, role-playing, policy writing, instructional leadership, curriculum, time

management, human behavior and psychology, networking, legal aspects of education, collective bargaining and contract negotiation, interpersonal communications, teacher motivation, assertive behavior, change models, and stress management.

When asked to give advice to prospective female school administrators, the members of the sample gave the following suggestions most frequently: (a) be exceptionally good at what you do and work harder than anyone else; "bloom where you're planted", (b) be more knowledgeable than anyone else--stay current in your field, especially concerning instruction and teacher evaluation; constantly learn new things, (c) learn to have real "people skills"--interpersonal skills--you must like to work with people, (d) market yourself--shine--maintain high visibility; be known by taking on new projects, volunteering for various committees, taking part in school-community activities, and being active in professional organizations, (e) find a mentor and a support group; get involved in networking, and (f) don't be afraid to admit failure or that you don't know something--ask for advice when you need it." Other suggestions included becoming more assertive and independent, sharpening organizational and communication skills, having excellent credentials, being yourself and knowing yourself, watching your image, having the courage to stand up for what you believe, being confident and believing in yourself, being prepared to spend much of your time at your job, and being persistent. Comments related to this area included: "I would advise her to grasp every opportunity to understand the total picture. Women, in particular, cannot afford tunnel vision." "Be exceptionally good at whatever you do." "Re appearance--one ounce of image is worth a pound of performance." "Don't be afraid to make mistakes; it's better to take part and be wrong than not be in the game at all." "A female must learn not to be overly sensitive to criticism. You must use it to grow and expand your own personal horizons." "Be the best you can be--same advice I would give to a male." "Market yourself; just because you're good, don't think that someone will find you."

"Play the game but be sure you know all the rules." "Never use being female as an excuse to get out of doing something." "Learn everything about everything. You've got to know it all."

In summarizing the results of this study concerning the profiles, pluses, and problems of female school executives, the following generalizations can be made:

1. The typical female school executive is in her forties, has taught for 8-10 years before entering administration, has held an administrative position for less than 10 years, works between 50 and 60 hours a week, does not aspire to be a superintendent, had a mentor at some point in her career, did not plan to become an administrator when she first became a teacher, did no long-term career planning after she began teaching, and prefers a situational leadership style.
2. The pluses of being female in the male-dominated field of educational administration are: having sensitivity to the needs of others, being able to serve as a role model or mentor for other women, having a better understanding of female employees and family concerns of all employees, being better organized and more thorough, being able to work the system easily, and having and using intuition in the job.
3. The most common problems for female school executives include: difficulty in gaining male respect, no entry to the male network, not being seen as an authority figure, not being trusted by female employees, difficulties with males on-the-job, employment discrimination, and being seen as a threat by men in higher-level positions.

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